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An Occult and Alchemical Library

Mitch Fraas

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An Occult and Alchemical Library

Abstract

Essay on the acquisition of the Charles Rainsford collection of occult and alchemical manuscripts.

Keywords

Alchemy, occult, science, Northumberland

Disciplines

History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Library and Information Science

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Nothing can more effectually contribute to the Cultivation & Improvement of a Country, the Wisdom, Riches, & Strength, Virtue and Piety, the Welfare & Happiness of a People, than a proper Education of Youth, by forming their Manners, imbu- ing

28
Wednesday
JAN 2015

An Occult and Alchemical Library

POSTED BY MITCH FRAAS IN POSTS

≈ 11 COMMENTS



When acquiring early manuscripts these days libraries mostly get them one at a time. A [15th century medical compendium](#) here, a cache of [Mexican inquisition proceedings](#) there. It was with excitement then that my colleagues and I read the [catalog for the sale](#) of some of the [12th Duke of Northumberland's collection](#) this past July. Amongst the treasures was a somewhat unassuming lot consisting of nearly 60 manuscript volumes from a single 18th century collector. These manuscripts had been left to the 2nd Duke of Northumberland by his friend Charles Rainsford (1728-1809).

♣ WELCOME

Welcome to Unique at Penn, part of the family of University of Pennsylvania Libraries blogs. Every week this space will feature descriptions and contextualization of items from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries. The site focuses on those materials held by Penn which are in some sense "unique" - drawn from both our special and circulating collections, whether a one-of-a-kind medieval manuscript or a twentieth-century popular novel with generations of student notes penciled inside. See the About page for more on the blog and to contact the editor.

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Since 1809 they had sat on the shelves at Alnwick Castle, seeing only sporadic use. Rainsford was not only a British general and sometime governor of Gibraltar but an avid alchemist and occultist, fascinated by everything from the philosopher's stone to Tarot to Rosicrucianism. The manuscript library he left to the Duke of Northumberland contained works he had collected in Gibraltar and on the continent but also a number copied out in his own hand from texts he had seen or borrowed. As Penn has long been a major collector in the history of science, **especially that of chemistry and alchemy**, my colleagues and I thought the opportunity to acquire an entire manuscript library was too good to pass up. Thanks to the generous support of the B.H. Breslauer foundation as well as several endowments here at Penn we were able to be the winning bidder when the collection was sold at Sotheby's.




— Alnwick Castle, Northumberland.
Photo by Fiona James (CC-BY 2.0). [Flickr](#).

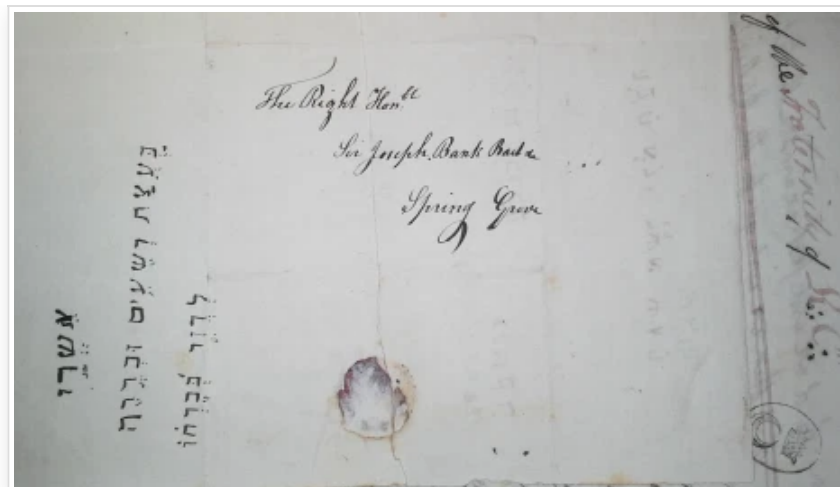


and intellectual circles of most of the great enlightenment scientists – thriving in a world where new knowledge, ideas, and speculation were welcome. Rainsford himself was a friend of the great English naturalist **Joseph Banks** and while looking at the collection before the sale in London I was pleasantly surprised to have this note fall out of one of Rainsford's volumes:

Many people think of alchemy and occultism as having their heyday in the medieval period but there has been a recent flurry of scholarship on the importance of speculative science and the occult during the 18th-century European enlightenment. Rosicrucians, hermeticists, and alchemists were part of the social

- August 2018
- December 2017
- November 2017
- July 2017
- October 2016
- July 2016
- June 2016
- May 2016
- March 2016
- December 2015
- November 2015
- October 2015
- September 2015
- August 2015
- June 2015
- March 2015
- February 2015
- January 2015
- October 2014
- September 2014
- July 2014
- June 2014
- May 2014
- April 2014
- February 2014
- January 2014
- December 2013
- November 2013

 Follow ...



— Note addressed to Sir Joseph Banks found in UPenn Ms. Codex 1684 (formerly Alwnick Ms. 595).

The Rainsford collection physically arrived here at Penn in the fall and sits together as it did for decades at Alnwick. Indeed, more than any volume in particular the collection probably has its greatest value in its whole as an almost fully intact 18th century manuscript library, representing the accumulated learning of an emblematic gentleman scientist. All of the manuscripts in the collection have been given [very brief records in our online catalog](#) and are available to researchers now. In addition, however the next year our fantastic cataloging staff will be working through each volume to provide comprehensive descriptions of their contents [[Here's an example of one already completed](#)].



- October 2013
- September 2013
- August 2013
- July 2013
- June 2013
- May 2013
- April 2013
- March 2013
- February 2013
- January 2013
- December 2012
- October 2012
- September 2012
- August 2012
- July 2012
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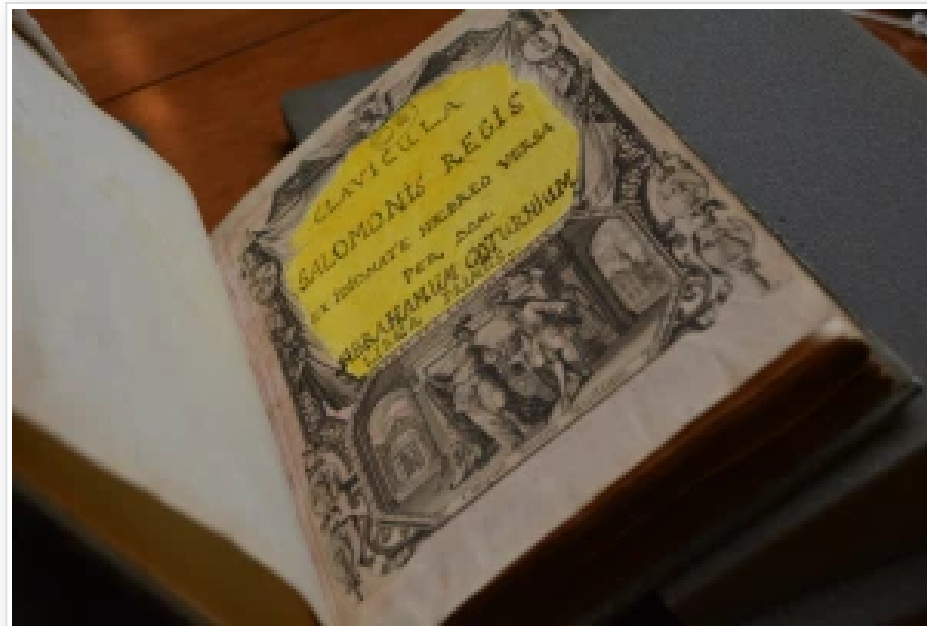
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— The Rainsford collection in processing at Penn

The collection represents Rainsford's wide reading and collecting interests with manuscripts in French, German, Italian, Latin, English with many snippets in Hebrew. A few of my favorites include a fantastic compilation in Rainsford's hand while governor at Gibraltar on Judicial Astronomy, a copy of Nicolas Flamel's supposed 1414 final testament, a treatise on summoning demons with black-and-red illustrated pages, and an Italian work on sexual health. At least four of the volumes (and likely more) in his library came from the Jesuit College at Naples whose library was seized as part of the suppression of the Jesuits and sold in part in 1780. These manuscripts go beyond the alchemical and occult and include an unpublished chronicle kept by a Jesuit in Naples between 1668 and 1725.



— UPenn Ms. Codex 1673 (formerly Alnwick Ms. 584)

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Richard Griscom

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- UPenn Ms. Codex 1669 (formerly Alnwick ms. 580). Treatise on summoning demons.

As someone interested in the history of the book and reading I'm thrilled that the collection also includes a **pre-printed** do-it-yourself commonplace book used by Rainsford to record alchemical calculations and notes. In fact a good number of the works in the collection are commonplace or notebooks of one sort or another into which Rainsford copied tidbits from a variety of print and manuscripts sources, many of which are unidentified.

Finally, the one that got away. At the July sale in London we were able to purchase all but one of Rainsford's manuscripts from Alnwick castle. One gorgeous volume, full of watercolors was **lotted separately** and sold on its own to an anonymous phone bidder. An open call to the lucky new owner of this manuscript, we'd be happy at Penn to create a digital facsimile of the manuscript at your convenience so that Rainsford's library here could be 'virtually' complete!

[\[View the University of Pennsylvania Libraries' press release on the Rainsford collection\]](#)

Notes

For a recent excellent study of eighteenth-century occultism which cites some of the Rainsford manuscripts (then at Alnwick) see Paul Monod's *Solomon's Secret Arts: the occult in the Age of Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 2013)

Two earlier inventories of the Rainsford manuscripts from Alnwick exist. One was done as part of the [Historical Manuscript Commission's survey](#) published in 1872. The other was compiled by Adam MacLean in the early 1990s and is available [online](#).

For notes generally on Rainsford's collection see:

Ron Heisler and Adam Maclean, "General Rainsford. An Alchemical and Rosicrucian Enthusiast." *Hermetic Journal* (1990), 129-13

G.P.G. Hills, "The Rainsford Papers in the British Museum." *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* XXVI, 1913.

Beyond the British Library there are also additional Rainsford papers and manuscripts at the Wellcome library in London ([MSS 4032-4039](#)).

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About Mitch Fraas

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11

THOUGHTS ON “AN OCCULT AND ALCHEMICAL LIBRARY”



Anne Leonard *said:*

January 28, 2015 at 3:53 pm

Will these eventually be digitized and available online?

REPLY

Pingback: [Penn Libraries Acquires Collection of Eighteenth Century Occult and Alchemical Manuscripts | News Center](#)



Mitch Fraas *said:*

January 28, 2015 at 3:58 pm

Thanks so much for your interest! I would love to get them digitized and I think it's something we will likely do in the coming years. Right now we're working through cataloging them and will go from there! Let me know though if there are particular mss. you are interested in and I can try and work to get reproductions.

REPLY



brixton *said:*

January 28, 2015 at 5:55 pm

Amazing!

REPLY

Pingback: [Whewell's Gazette: Vol. #33 | Whewell's Ghost](#)



Diane O'Donovan said:

February 27, 2015 at 12:22 pm

It seems to me – I assume that I'm mistaken – that the name on that note reads "Sir Joseph Bank B....". What is the last word on that line, do you know?

REPLY



Mitch Fraas said:

February 27, 2015 at 2:06 pm

Thanks so much Diane for taking a close look. I believe that says "Sir Joseph Banks Bart. &c" being the abbreviation for baronet.

REPLY



Diane O'Donovan said:

March 20, 2015 at 6:54 pm

Good heavens – I only knew him as a botanist. Very well known down our way.

REPLY



Denis Robillard said:

September 21, 2015 at 10:25 pm

Colonel Rainsford was also based at Blackheath and was responsible for recruiting and embarking the Hessian troops which were hired as mercenaries to fight in the American revolution. Many thousands of those disbanded soldiers eventually settled in parts of America and Quebec after the war.

REPLY



CJ Fuller said:

December 11, 2015 at 4:59 am

Very interesting. I would love to be able to view that Clavicula Salomonis, Codex 1673. If it is ever digitized please let me know.

It is amusing to think that while they were filming Harry Potter at Alnwick Castle, there was a significant collection of real occult manuscripts sitting in its library!

REPLY



leo said:

January 6, 2016 at 6:30 pm

Incredible! I am very much interested, being Mexican. One of my forebears was viceroy of sicilly and won the battle of Sessa. Tell me a lot more!
How exciting!
Lepoldo.

REPLY

LEAVE A REPLY

The conclusions and views presented on posts within "Unique at Penn" reflect those of their writers and do not represent the official position of the University of Pennsylvania or the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

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